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## 硕 士 学 位 论 文

*Pnin*: Nabokov's Artistic Reality

《普宁》: 纳博科夫的艺术现实

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## Synopsis

With his consummate artistic skills, Vladimir Nabokov established his fame and status in the history of the twentieth-century American literature as a distinguished and outstanding master in postmodern literature. While *Lolita* came out as a controversial issue of the reading public, it should be noted that Nabokov is an artist who harbors a concept of art that is extremely different from the accepted one. Insisting on the combination of scientific accuracy and poetic passion together in his works of art, he had spent his whole life constructing his wonderland, with a reality only to be appreciated from the perspective of art. This sort of reality is extraordinary, even unprecedented, as it usually comes into being through his exploration on the relationships between several pairs of themes, such as memory and time, consciousness and reality, and pretense and truth. With these themes in mind, Nabokov never concerns about serious matters such as politics, morality or social responsibility; instead, he only cares about creating an aesthetic ecstasy out of his artistic work. In this sense, Nabokov's art, rather than his nationality, has become his passport among different nations.

It is well known that Nabokov has an unexhausted zest for pursuing creativity and originality. He pursued the same goal when he was dealing with his fourth English novel *Pnin*, which also turned out to be a success. At the very beginning, however, fame did not come easily. With its simple plot line and loosely connected chapters, *Pnin* tended to impress people as a simple novella, consisting of a series of anecdotes, with the only connection in the same protagonist. Compared with other masterpieces, its artistic value is easily to be eclipsed. Fortunately, Nabokov is proved to be such a master of art who matches his fame that he never plays at any works created out of his effort. In recent years, attention on *Pnin* no longer sticks to character analysis or plot development; instead, it goes on to explore beneath the surface, such as the baffling narrative structure and reality with exquisite enigmatic designs. Trying to get a

panorama idea of the artistic reality in this novel, this thesis tends to advance the discussion in these consecutive chapters: “Introduction”, “Truth in Reality” (Chapter One), “Subtle Narrative” (Chapter Two), “Enigmatic Designs” (Chapter Three), “Bitter Smile” (Chapter Four), and “Conclusion”. “Introduction” offers some background information on the writing and the publication of *Pnin*, and a brief opening on the success of the novel. Chapter One presents Nabokov's artistic perception on the nature of reality: reality is accessible but it is relatively subjective; the key to acquire a sensible perception of reality is to keep discovering possible hidden designs. Chapter Two focuses on the narrative way the novel follows: the narrator keeps looming from time to time; his mysterious intervention forms another part of the artistic reality of the novel. Chapter Three turns to cope with those subtle designs imbedded in the text; these exquisite designs seem to be detached from one another but there do exist inner connections among them if they are closely examined. The previous chapters work together to foreground the protagonist, Pnin, discussed in Chapter Four. This is a Russian scholar exiled in America, kind-hearted and knowledgeable with an eccentric disposition. Living in the exotic environment, he constantly bumps into embarrassing situations either by some errors of understanding or judgment, unfortunately cutting himself as a comic wretched figure among his colleagues; in the light of readers, however, Pnin turns out to be the most engaging character in the novel, in whose fortunes and misfortunes we take a sympathetic interest. Finally “Conclusion” briefly summarizes the artistic values of *Pnin* and pays attention to the characteristics in literary genre of this novel. In a word, reflections on themes such as consciousness and reality, and extraordinary artistic skills such as style and narrative structure, combine together to generate creativity and originality in the works of Nabokov; and it is this unique artistic perception that underprops the abundant and amusing artistic world of *Pnin*, making it an extraordinary acquisition to the literary world.

**Key words:** Nabokov; art; reality

## 摘要

弗拉迪米尔·纳博科夫是一位后现代主义文学经典作家，他凭借精湛的艺术技巧确立了自己在二十世纪美国文学史上举足轻重的地位。阅读《洛莉塔》这部常被误认为情色的文学作品时，我们不应该忘记，纳博科夫的文学艺术观与传统的文学艺术观截然不同。他认为，一部好的艺术作品应该同时具有科学的精确和诗的激情，他乐此不疲所创造的艺术王国有着非同寻常的审美现实。这种艺术现实的独特性来源于纳氏对几个永恒主题的探讨，其中包括：记忆与时间的关系、意识与现实的关系以及虚假与真实的关系等。这些主题几乎贯穿了纳氏的每一部作品。他所关注的并非政治、道德、或社会责任这类严肃主题，而是他能否从作品的创作中体验到他所向往的那种审美狂喜。在这种意义上，真正让纳博科夫享誉世界的护照是他的艺术，而不是他的国籍。

纳博科夫向来以追求新颖的文学构思著称。这些技巧在其公认的名作里已经得到了很好的证明。同样，在其第四部以英语写作的作品《普宁》中，纳氏再一次将他深刻的人文感悟与独特的文体构思巧妙地融为一体。这部不足两百页的作品，由于看起来结构松散，情节简单，主题浅显，常常被人们轻率地判定为通俗的消遣读物，然而纳氏以其文学大师对现实独特的观察视角和巧妙的叙事方式证实了这部作品的不同寻常之处。随着对这部作品研究的深入，近年来的学界评论越来越多地从最初的人物分析转向深层次的探讨，比如令人困惑的叙述结构和谜一样的现实。本文通过对此类问题的探讨，试图勾画出这部作品所体现的艺术现实。导言开篇介绍了《普宁》的创作及出版背景，以及它在文学界所取得的成功。第一章主要探讨纳氏对现实本质的艺术见解。他认为，现实是可以认识的，但同时又是主观的，人们对现实的合理认识来源于不断发现并解答隐藏其中的各式各样的神秘“构图”。第二章聚焦于作品的叙述方式：小说的叙述者时隐时现，他的存在及叙述成为勾画这部作品艺术现实的另一个关键因素。第三章集中诠释文本中隐藏的各种构图，这些构图看起来似乎相互独立，但通过详细的文本分析可以发现它们的内在联系。这些章节不仅对这部作品的艺术技巧进行了较为详尽的分

析，同时也让人越来越将注意力转向小说的主人公普宁，一个流亡美国的俄国学者。这是一个善良淳厚但性情古怪的人物，常常由于误解、固执或其它原因而使自己陷入尴尬的境地，由此给同事们创造了诸多的笑料。不过，这样一个滑稽人物却在读者那里奇迹般地获得了同情和理解，他可以说是小说中最动人心弦的人物，他的一切幸与不幸都牵动着读者敏感的神经。结语部分简要总结了《普宁》的文学艺术价值，同时对这部作品体现出来的多重体裁特点进行了必要的说明。简言之，纳博科夫对虚假与真实等永恒主题的探讨以及对艺术技巧的精妙运用，共同构成了他独特的艺术世界，这些独特的艺术见解与叙事技巧使得《普宁》成为一部重要的文学作品。

**关键字：**纳博科夫；艺术；现实



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## Introduction

Once appraised by Updike as “the best writer of English prose at present holding American citizenship, the only writer” (qtd. in Zhan 1), Vladimir Nabokov is a distinctive and outstanding figure in the history of the twentieth-century American literature. He is widely recognized “with William Faulkner, one of the two great American novelists of that same time” (qtd. in Zhan 1), but he did not establish his reputation as a skilled novelist until in his middle age in America. His initial zest was for lepidopterology, a subject he had devoted himself to since his early childhood. Even when he started working on literature in Europe, his reputation was only limited within communities of Russian expatriates as a novelist and scholar.

After he moved to the United States, he began to rebuild his career as a writer of fiction. His first novel written in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was finished in 1941. Unfortunately days before its publication there was the historical event of the attack on Pearl Harbor, hence its negligence by the public. This embarrassment was not improved until 1944 when *The New Yorker* started to first consider his work, since his essays and stories had already drawn the attention of editors and fellow writers. His second novel in English was *Bend Sinister* (1947), which turned out a little more successful than the previous one. Over the next few years while he was being engaged in teaching duties and other literary and scholarly projects, he managed to work during the intervals on another novel, which was set for the first time in America. *Lolita* (1955) was based on an unpublished pre-war short story set in Europe about a man sexually attracted to a prepubescent girl. Complexity increased as the story developed, bringing much labor and anxiety on the part of the author. It was under this growing anxiety that a short story in English, *Pnin*, started to come into being on Nabokov’s writing schedule.

*Pnin* was finished in the summer of 1953 when Nabokov was still working on the

end of the novel *Lolita*. It is about the comical misadventures of an exiled Russian professor on his way to deliver a lecture to a woman's club in a small American town. Compared with *Lolita*, this short story is rather funny and amusing. It is said that this new character of Pnin was created as a relief from the dark obsessive world of Humbert Humbert, as Nabokov mentioned in a letter to a friend, a "brief sunny escape from (*Lolita*'s) intolerable spell" (Lodge, "Exile"). But it is evident that once the story achieved success, it could to some extent function as a kind of insurance against the difficulties Nabokov might encounter in the publication of *Lolita*, which was full of descriptions in lavish and eloquent details about the infatuation with and seduction of twelve-year-old girl.

As it later turned out, *Pnin* was developed into a complete novel composed of a series of short stories. It was considered to be a shrewd professional strategy, since these short stories could first be published independently in *The New Yorker*, and later strung together to form a book, by means of which he could somewhat be ensured with some continuity of publication and income while trying to find a publisher for *Lolita*. This strategy partly explains the unusual form of *Pnin*. Different from the usual structure of a novel, this book is composed of six relatively independent chapters, which do not come one after another in a chronological order of plot development. In a sense, each chapter can be taken as a complete short story. Therefore, when Nabokov attempted to find a publisher for this book, the collection-like form of the book baffled many publishers.

As professional readers find out, however, this book is much more than a collection of character sketches. Almost every chapter follows the same narrative arc, which starts with a peaceful description of one aspect of Pnin, followed by some kind of fortune that seems to be able to change his life for the better and ends with an unexpected setback which is usually ascribed to Pnin's overconfidence and inability in judging situations properly. No matter which chapter is concerned, thematic design is never changed; it is always focused on the same protagonist who tries his best to adjust himself to the new environment of America but usually ends up with a failure.

Nabokov once stressed the element of this character when he was looking for a publisher for the completed book:

In *Pnin* I have created an entirely new character, the like of which has never appeared in any other book. A man of great moral courage, a pure man, a scholar and a staunch friend, serenely wise, faithful to a single love, he never descends from a high plane of life characterized by authenticity and integrity. But handicapped and hemmed in by his incapability to learn a language, he seems a figure of fun to many an average intellectual....  
(Lodge, "Exile")

With this inherent idiosyncrasy of the protagonist, the character of *Pnin* seldom changes all through the novel. After reading through the whole book, however, readers are capable of picturing a complete and vivid image of *Pnin* with all the details acquired from these chapters. It is fair to say that the unusual form of the book should receive the credit.

Nabokov is a writer noted for his creativity and originality. So is his intention on structure design. As far as the seemingly detachable structure of *Pnin* is concerned, it should be noted that Nabokov's concept of an artistic whole differs greatly from the traditionally accepted one; it rests on the plotting of thematic lines rather than on that of fabular and character development. To have a better understanding of these thematic lines, the following chapters in this thesis will respectively pay attention to "Truth in Reality", "Subtle Narrative", "Enigmatic Designs" and "Bitter Smile".

Chapter One focuses on the theme of reality. It is never exaggerated to say that the perpetual goal of Nabokov's life is to pursue reality, either in life or in literature. What makes his attempt distinguished owes its credit to his unique way of perceiving and presenting reality. Different from materialists, Nabokov pays more attention to the reality projected in man's mind, rather than the objective matters beyond man's reach, hence his conclusion that reality is actually subjective. In the meanwhile, reality is accessible since every sensible person is inherent with the ability of perception. The only difference lies in the way of perception. To Nabokov, the key to acquire a sensible

perception of reality is to keep discerning hidden patterns or designs. The access to reality is dependent on the extent to which mysterious designs are discovered. Not only does he believe this rule in life, he also applies this principle to his writing in the literary career. He once affirmed that “The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (Yardley, “Nabokov's”). So it is the case with his literary creation. *Pnin*, with an apparently detached structure, seems to be a plain book with nothing extraordinary. Following Nabokov's theory of discovering reality, we will find that there is another truth that remains to be uncovered.

Chapter Two revolves around finding the mysterious narrator in the novel. With a narration conducted most of the time by third person omniscient, the narrative style of the novel proves to be an important part of the reality to be discussed. The narrator, by his own account, is an old friend of Pnin. As the novel develops, however, his identity keeps changing from time to time. This shift in different status puzzles many readers: it is reasonable that he can acquire much information about Pnin since he claims to be an old friend, but how is it possible that he knows every detail of Pnin's life, even his conscious world, just like an omniscient? When there is discrepancy in the accounts of the past between the narrator and Pnin, which one is reliable? If Nabokov really follows his principle of pursuing reality, what sense do all these “true or false” make about? All these mysteries will be unraveled in this chapter.

Chapter Three shifts to various enigmatic designs in this book. Since Nabokov believes in discovering reality through a constant determination of designs, his readers should observe the same principle while dealing with his works. Carl Proffer suggests that an ideal reader of Nabokov's fictions should be the possessor of an eidetic memory (Parker 16). The exercise of locating, retaining and assembling components of various forms is more than a game, although game playing is one of the levels of enjoyment in reading Nabokov. It is generally acknowledged that *Pnin* is strewn with mysterious designs that generate an inner connection among all the relatively separated chapters, providing an exhaustible source for thematic lines and thus forming an



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